

PEOPLE ON THE PLAINS



Shores Family, Photo by Solomon D. Butcher. Photo Courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society.



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Unit Four

People on the Plains

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The following is background information for creating lesson plans. Activities start on page 63.

Over hundreds, even thousands of years, many people have called the Great Plains their homeland.

First Plains People

The first people living on the prairie were the ancestors of the various American Indian Tribes. Through *archeology*, we can surmise that the plains have been inhabited for centuries by groups of people who lived in semi-permanent villages and depended on planting crops. Their culture was based mainly on an even balance between raising crops of corn, squash, beans, and hunting animals. Many of the ideas we associate with American Indians such as the *travois*, various ceremonies, *tipis*, *earth lodges*, and controlled bison hunts come from these first prairie people.

Horses were brought to Mexico by the Spanish in the 1600s. With the migration of the horse from Mexico in the 1700s, the culture of the plains changed from a permanent lifestyle to one that was more mobile. Before the horse, the cultures hunted and traveled in relatively small restricted areas. With the introduction of the horse in American Indian society, greater distances could be covered. The horse became a status symbol to the American Indian. Because of the importance of owning horses, individuals amassed vast herds of these animals.

The first known historic tribe in the plains area was the Pawnee who lived in earth lodges part of the year and traveled in tipis during the hunts in the summer and fall. The earth lodge

tribes such as the Arikara, Hidatsa, Mandan, Omaha, Oto, Ponca, Pawnee, Wichita, Winnebago, among others, planted crops such as corn, squash, and beans and stored their food in underground storage caches. Their semi-subterranean lodges held from 10 to 40 people. Several lodges were grouped together to form fortified villages. Smaller groups ventured out with tipis for the bison hunts, returning to the earth lodge for winter.

Glossary

Abolitionist - a person who believed slavery should be illegal

Archeology - the scientific study of the material remains of people, customs, and life of the past

Clan - a group of people united by common interest and characteristics

Earth Lodge - a large circular house that had dirt walls and a roof held up by trunks of trees and then covered with dirt or sod; was lived in by some American Indians on the plains

Exoduster - an African-American who was an ex-slave who moved west to homestead and own land

Immigrant - a person who comes from another country to take up permanent residence in a new country

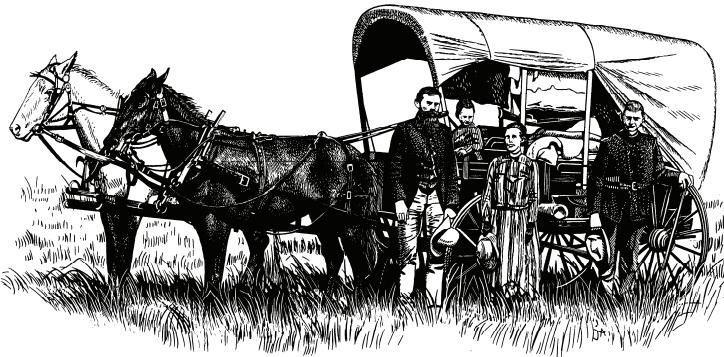
Propaganda - exaggerated idea, facts, or examples used to further one's cause or to damage an opposing cause

Tipi - a circular house made of tree poles and animal skins that some American Indians on the plains lived in; Sioux word meaning "home"

Travois - a vehicle used by American Indians that has two poles tied together at one end, and a net or cloth at the other end to carry items; pulled by an animal or person.

Other tribes on the prairie were the warriors' societies that are typically associated with the Great Plains. These groups, such as the Lakota-Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapahos, Comanche, Kiowa, Crow, among others, lived mainly in tipis, traveling through the Plains region. These groups were the great hunters of the Plains following the bison or "buffalo" and foraging for berries, roots, and other plants. They lived in *clans*, traveling to familiar places and encampments. Often they traded and warred with the earth lodge dwellers.

Many tribes or nations had similar ideas and beliefs. They believed in the circle of life, and the belief that everything is connected. You were born, you grew, you lived, you died and you returned to Mother Earth to allow others to be born, creating a circle that never ends. They believed everything in life is dependent on everything else. They also believed that every rock, grass, plant, animal, and man had a spirit. Their beliefs and religion were part of their everyday life. The land was the mother of all things, and had to be treated with great care and respect. They lived close to the land for centuries and understood the "ways of Mother Earth." They believed that Mother Earth provided the animals and the plants for them as long as they did not abuse or take more than they needed to survive.



Storytelling was a very important aspect of Plains Tribal life. The stories explained the ways and beliefs of their people to children this is how children learned of their history, their world, and their traditions. Many of these stories or legends are still used today for the same reasons.

When the prairie was changed by the coming of the homesteaders, the culture of the prairie tribes was dramatically affected. The prairie tribes were moved off their traditional homelands onto reservations by the United States government to make way for the ever increasing settlement. They were forced into a foreign lifestyle that was in opposition to their own.

Many Faces of the Homesteaders

Many people traveled from east of the Mississippi River in the United States and from Europe to homestead in the Great Plains area. They came for different reasons. The one thing all the homesteaders had in common was the desire for better lives for themselves and their children. Many believed the way to accomplish this was through owning land.

Place of Birth	Percentages of Total Population, United States, 1870-1930						
	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930
England, Scotland, & Wales	13.6	13.7	13.5	11.3	9.1	8.2	8.6
Ireland	32.7	27.8	20.2	15.6	10.0	7.5	6.5
Other Northern Europe	8.8	10.8	13.6	13.7	12.3	11.9	11.1
Germany	29.8	29.4	30.1	25.8	17.1	12.1	11.3
Eastern Europe	1.7	3.3	6.9	14.2	27.4	32.0	30.2
Southern Europe	0.5	0.9	2.2	5.1	11.3	13.7	14.8
Canada	8.7	10.7	10.6	11.4	8.9	8.1	9.1
Other American	1.0	1.3	1.2	1.3	2.1	4.3	5.7
Other Foreign	1.4	2.0	1.7	1.5	1.8	2.3	2.6

When people heard there was free land west of the Mississippi River open to farming, they came in increasing numbers to stake their claims. They came to better themselves and to establish farms to pass on to their children. City dwellers dreamed of farming and owning land as there was little land left in the eastern United States that was not owned. Eastern farmers came west to start over as they were dissatisfied with the land in the east. After the Civil War, many Union soldiers moved west to homestead partially for new opportunities and partially because of the new laws allowing veterans to use their service time toward the requirement time on their homestead claim.



IMMIGRATION.

The ending of the Civil War in 1865 sent many people to the west for new opportunities. One group that settled the

west was African Americans. After the Civil War, slaves were freed in the South.

- Yet many of these freedmen did not find the freedom they

Sign courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society

had hoped to gain. In retaliation for the loss of a free labor source and changes in the southern life-style, many African Americans were robbed of property, beaten, refused rights, and at times lynched by separatist groups like the Ku Klux Klan which was formed after the Civil War. Many of the Black Americans looked for freedom on the western frontier. These ex-slaves were inspired by the exodus from slavery in the Bible and often compared their movement to the west with that story. They were called "*Exodusters*." In 1879 between 20,000 and 40,000 Exodusters headed west to homestead. Many traveled in family and community groups, starting towns and communities for African Americans in the west.

Many Southerners tried to stop the Exodusters from leaving for fear of losing their labor force. Many Exodusters headed for the Kansas territory where John Brown, a famous *abolitionist*, fought to keep Kansas a free state for all people. At first they were welcome in the Great Plains, but eventually, people started to force the exoduster to move because of racism. Still, more freedmen came west to homestead.

The railroads and pioneer communities sent representatives to Europe to get people to homestead in the Great Plains. In pamphlets, railroad agents showed pictures of tree-lined streets, flowing streams, and rich farm lands in order to encourage Europeans to immigrate to the U.S. Some Europeans, called *immigrants*, believed the stories. Food shortages, land scarcity, social and religious oppression in some parts of Europe, led many to come to the U.S. to homestead. Some formed groups to travel together, setting up communities. Thousands left Europe bound for the “land of milk and honey” only to find that the stories they heard held little truth.

Many single people, both men and women, came west to homestead. Single men came west and often looked for wives to help them homestead. Single women came to start a new life and own land. In the eastern states, women were not usually allowed to own property.

Travel to the Great

There were many ways to travel to the Great Plains during the homesteading era. The early homesteaders traveled by river boats along the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers to places like Omaha and then they traveled by wagons to their homestead. These routes were set up by explorers and early pioneers who traveled to the west coast. In 1869 the transcontinental railroad was completed, decreasing the time to travel west. Often homesteaders headed west via trains and then used wagons for the shorter distance to their claims. The immigrants from Europe traveled several months by steamship to the U.S.